

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Silvia Posocco, *Secrecy and Insurgency: Socialities and Knowledge Practices in Guatemala*, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-8173-1359-3 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-8173-8698-6 (ebook)

Secrecy and Insurgency is a study of guerrilla ex-combatants of the FAR (*Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes* / Rebel Armed Forces) living in the northern Guatemalan department (state) of Petén. Anchored in everyday life after the civil war (1960-1996), this ethnographic text focuses on the testimony of insurgents about their experiences during the war, and specifically about practices of “guerrilla secrecy”. This is not a book about concealment, however. Rather, the text explores how the practices of secrecy are productive—generating identities, subject positions, socialities, material arrangements, and particular ways of life and death during a time of conflict. *Secrecy and Insurgency* is unusual for the loving engagement with extended testimony of ex-combatants, for the rigorous and rewarding meditations on the performativity of guerrilla secrecy, and for the moments of tenderness and ferocity that characterise the analysis. These various attributes come together in the political project of the text. Dedicated to “the memory of the *compañeras* and *compañeros* who died during the Guatemalan conflict and to those who sustain the struggle by different means in civilian life”, the book aims to centre, supplement and intensify the insurgent project of the FAR as a condition of the present. In this work, relations of secrecy become a fertile space for engaging with insurgency and rebellion.

Secrecy and Insurgency at first appears to be a contradictory project. Guerrilla secrecy was a mode of survival during the war and continues to be important today when ex-combatants are regularly assassinated in Guatemala (Arias 2014). How then could revealing practices of guerrilla secrecy benefit insurgency rather than undermine it? Posocco’s work transcends this seeming contradiction in two interconnected ways. First, the text focuses fastidiously on how

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ex-combatants describe their individual and collective practices and seeks to be accountable to the demands of interlocutors for both secrecy and disclosure. As Posocco explains, the book's descriptive work is "inscribed within an ethnography of secrecy and conflict that is self-consciously complicit with that secrecy-imbued and violence-marked ethnographic encounter willed by the ethnographer, but fully driven by the agentic 'object/subject' of study..." (p.9). Thus, the text functions as a kind of extension of guerrilla practices of secrecy rather than as exposé. Secondly, rather than attempting to assess the validity of guerrilla ethnographic accounts, the text interrogates the partial and contingent modes through which such accounts constitute new epistemologies, socialities, material arrangements, and much more. In a series of innovative and beautifully theorized chapters, Posocco examines the relation between subjectivity and guerrilla (re)naming practices; insurgent logics that link parts to wholes; the creation of moral orders in the forest (in clandestine bases); the elaboration of bodies and technologies (guerrilla cyborg politics); and the making via experience of guerrilla being-in-the-world.

By asking how guerrilla secrecy produces other worlds, *Secrecy and Insurgency* provides a terrain for unsettling, and occasionally attacking, dominant formations. One such formation is ethnography itself and specifically the anthropological norms which define (good) "thick" ethnography as a knowledge practice that should exhaustively describe "unitary and internally coherent entities, be they societies, cultures, or individual subjects" (p.6). Instead, Posocco argues for a post-plural ethnographic mode that engages patiently with refusal, avoidance, partial disclosure, dissimulation, deflection, and other tactics of secrecy to produce an ethnographic account which is necessarily incommensurable and open to possibilities of unexpected politics and alliance. Partial as it may be, the text nevertheless describes an array of clandestine insurgent practices including recruitment and training; the management of fighters and logistics;

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the building of alliances, friendships and intimacies among individuals and communities; experiences of battle, injury, abandonment and death; and the challenges of transitioning back to civilian life. *Secrecy and Insurgency* is a model for an accountable “form of description...[in which] the thickness of ethnography may be its very thinness” (p.9). This approach will be of great interest to scholars engaging in ethnographic work, and is relevant to ongoing conversations about the violence of empiricist forms of human geography and related disciplines (Sundberg 2003; Wainwright 2013).

The most sustained work of *Secrecy and Insurgency* is to engage with ex-combatants’ narratives about the goals and conditions of clandestine struggle. However, the book cannot begin with these narratives, because as Posocco demonstrates there is a resistant silence about the insurgent project of the FAR in the social science literature about Guatemala. The first two chapters of the text explore how these silences have been produced through particular (trans)national relations of military, state, and social scientific institutions and actors. For example, Posocco describes how in the final years of the war and after the signing of the Peace Accords, many scholars and experts worked with donor/development organisations and produced research related to the activities and priorities of these organisations, including the World Bank, US Agency for International Development, and Conservation International. While some of this work is critical, Posocco shows that it is largely framed in ways that leave little room for an extended engagement with the insurgent project. As someone who is implicated in this academic institutional history, *Secrecy and Insurgency* is important to me because of the way that it opens spaces not only for insurgent narratives, but also for thinking and theorising the region in new and emancipatory terms. More broadly, the text offers a model for selectively engaging and moving beyond scholarly horizons projected by discourses of applied social science, especially in rural areas of Latin America.

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Once the genealogical work is complete, ex-combatants take centre stage—and they have a lot to say. The latter half of the book is filled with lengthy transcripts (many are more than one page) that Posocco articulates in analyses of how guerrilla secrecy conjures up alternative worlds. In the following excerpt, a Q’eqchi’ Maya ex-combatant reflects on her time in a guerrilla encampment:

I asked Alma whether when she got together with her partner they (the couple) informed anyone (*es decir informaron a alguien*), such as a military chief (*jefe militar*) of the event. Alma replied that she did...In her case, at the time, it was Comandante Méndez, as he was still alive and was there, so there were marriages then, marriages by arms, but there also was free union too (*entonces, allí existían casamientos también, por las armas, y existía unión libre también*). This was the first time I [Posocco] heard of “marriages by arms” (*casamientos por las armas*)...who got married by arms, that you may remember (*quien se casó por las armas, que usted se acuerde*)? Alma replied, someone whom people would call Magalí got married, Magalí and, I don’t know who it was, Noemí, I don’t remember who else was there. I also got married by that (*yo también me casé por eso*). She added that yes, it was like a marriage similar to that which occurs in civil life (*sí, o sea que allí era como un matrimonio parecido a lo que se da en la vida civil*), that is, if an unmarried woman goes just like that, without any formal support (*que si una muchacha se va solo así*), well, she has much less, less support (*pues tiene menos, menos apoyo*), as she has not respected her elders/superiors (*o no respetó a sus mayores*), we could say (*podríamos decir*), so the matter there was the same (*entonces la cuestión allí era lo mismo*), you see (*verdad*), it was similar to that (*era parecido a eso*). I asked Alma whether it was for that reason that there were “marriages by arms” (“*matrimonios por las*

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armas”) and she replied yes. I asked what the name of her *compañero* was and Alma replied that it was Eagle (*Águila*). So she had a marriage by arms (*así que hicieron un casamiento por las armas*) and everyone was there, everyone (*todos estuvieron allí, todos estuvieron*), the whole front. (p.159-160)

This fragment of a more extended quote provides an example of Posocco’s efforts to be accountable to interviewees by allowing them to really elaborate their ideas in the text. By including the original Spanish and notes about the ethnographic encounter, the quote is also accountable to readers who have a chance to read and/or re-interpret the transcripts. As well, the length of this quote and others permits Posocco to explore how social formations, such as gender, are constituted in particular spaces and moments rather than entering the analysis fully formed. Following Alma’s testimony, the text explores how gender and gendered intimacy takes shape in a performative and provisional fashion in relation to the spaces of militancy, shifting guerrilla moral and legal codes, and the imagined boundaries between clandestine and civilian life. The mode of interpreting interview testimony in *Secrecy and Insurgency* will be of particular interest to those who want to think about performativity by combining insights from Judith Butler’s work and work from Science and Technology Studies (e.g. Lansing 2012).

Secrecy and Insurgency documents the material and meaning-making work of guerrilla secrecy during the civil war in northern Guatemala. Posocco’s efforts to centre the struggle of the FAR in the social science literature on Guatemala is a valuable intellectual and political contribution in its own right. The book also contributes to wider projects to reckon with the histories of the civil war and its aftermath (Nelson 1999; Weld 2014) and to centre the Guatemalan experience in the history of the Cold War in the Americas (Grandin 2004). Such work is crucial for building conditions for social justice and specifically for holding the

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Guatemalan military and its supporters in the United States and elsewhere accountable for the genocidal violence which took place in Guatemala during the civil war. And while *Secrecy and Insurgency* will be of particular interest to those who wish to better understand the civil war in Guatemala, it will also be of great use to others. Anyone searching for new theoretical and methodological tools for understanding cultures of armed resistance to state repression will find this text highly rewarding. This book also has much to offer to scholars and students who want to understand how practices of secrecy inform and constitute state projects and tactics of repression, e.g. the war on drugs and enforced disappearance (Paley 2014).

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this review benefited from insightful comments from good colleagues and even better friends: Alicia Ivonne Estrada, Norma Rantisi, and Ted Rutland. Any remaining errors are my own.

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June 2015